

Wages cut for cleanup workers

■ EPA begins \$10 an hour cut for most workers

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Workers removing asbestos-contaminated vermiculite from area homes and businesses are seeing a dramatic pay cut

WESTERN NEWS

Libby MT 59923

Wednesday & Friday

JAN 28 2004

Superior Clipping Service

Glendive MT 406-377-6612

following the adoption of a new wage schedule by the Environmental Protection Agency.

People who had been paid hourly wages of \$24.29 to \$29.38 will now be paid \$14 to \$18 for every hour of work. The wage cuts will affect "the vast majority" of contracted employees, with only those working on heavy construction projects – not typical residential or business cleanups – still being paid according to the old scale, said local EPA project manager Jim Christiansen.

The new wage rates have been adopted because the scope of work at Libby has changed over time and to allow cleanup dollars to be stretched as far as possible, Christiansen said.

Because the Libby cleanup is a federally funded and operated project, wages are governed by the Davis Bacon Wage Act, which stipulates wage categories and rates on a state and county basis. In Lincoln County, wage rate schedules are separated for highway, heavy construction, commercial building, and resi-

dential construction.

For the past four years the category of "heavy construction" was used by the EPA to determine wages. This assessment was based primarily on work performed at the former screening plant site and vermiculite mine, which involved heavy equipment operations.

According to Christiansen, the current scope of work involves tasks more typical of "residential construction"

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activities.

While the closest labor rate in the residential construction schedule was considered too low to attract and retain skilled workers, the newly adopted wage range was considered "fair and reasonable," Christiansen said.

"Funding is exceptionally tight and we must balance our need to conduct the cleanup as quickly as possible with the ability to attract skilled workers and provide strong wages," Christiansen said. "It is important to note that this will not reduce the amount we spend on cleanup. We will be able to hire more workers and get more cleanup done with the money that we have, even though each individual worker will make

less."

At the peak of cleanup work last summer, around 115 to 120 people were working for EPA contractors in Libby, Christiansen said. Around 40 people are currently employed, and based on current funding that number is expected to top out at less than 100 this summer.

Lincoln County Commissioner John Konzen said he's spoken to several workers who were unhappy not only with the wage cuts but also with the way the issue was handled by the EPA and the Department of Transportation's Volpe Center, which has been providing management support to the EPA in Libby and carried out the agency's instructions for the wage change.

"They weren't happy with finding out at 4 o'clock in the afternoon that their wages were going to be cut the next morning," Konzen said.

Christiansen said he "dropped the ball" regarding communications on the wage cut. He said he gave a general direction to the Volpe Center project manager and expected that the change would be made when a new contract is awarded in a few months, but instead the change was made during the current contract with SaLute/Marcor.

"It is too late to bring this back, and because of this no advance warning was given by EPA in Libby," Christiansen said.

While Christiansen said that Davis Bacon wage schedules for

Montana have no classification for "abatement worker" or "hazardous materials handler," Konzen said figures from the state's Department of Labor and Industry put prevailing wages for asbestos removal workers at \$14.55 per hour plus another \$5.10 per hour for benefits, for a total of \$19.65 per hour. Libby cleanup workers employed by EPA contractors do not receive benefits.

Konzen said the county has contacted the governor's office and the offices of U.S. senators Max Baucus and Conrad Burns about the issue.

Christiansen said he is planning to hold a meeting in Libby next month to discuss the wage issue with current and former cleanup workers.

SDMS Document ID
2031924